

Earth-Friendly Gardening & Landscaping

The GreenMan



Environmental Lawn Care

Lawns can play an important part in our landscape: providing a welcome, green space for children, backyard barbecues, and other outdoor activities, in addition to their aesthetic value. Lawns also contribute significant environmental benefits: preventing erosion, nutrient runoff, filtering air, and providing natural "air conditioning" during the summer.



However, all of those advantages are lost when lawn care becomes warfare. When children and pets are at risk by crossing treated turf areas, or when sprays endanger the health of individuals who are immune-impaired or suffer from respiratory problems, we have to measure the real costs of lawn perfection. Are nodding violets, tasty spring onions, and edible dandelions so terrible that we're willing to imperil the health of ourselves and loved ones?

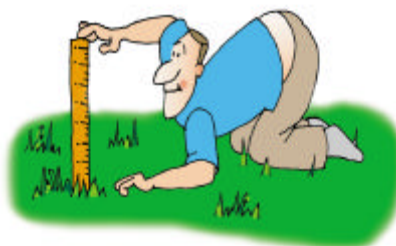
Instead of filling shopping carts with toxic solutions, we might borrow from the Hippocratic Oath and first do no harm. When dealing with nature, less is almost always more. And the best system for lawn care is actually simple and inexpensive.

Mowing Tips

Mowing comprises about 95 percent of lawn care — yet mowers and cutting blades are the most overlooked elements of maintaining a healthy lawn.

Tune up your mower: Either do it yourself, or look for specials for professional tune-ups. An efficient engine will run smoother and faster, cut grass more quickly and evenly, and facilitate grasscycling by chopping grass into fine particles. It will also cause less air pollution, use less fuel, and save mowing time.

Sharpen your blade: Carefully remove the blade and bring it to a shop for sharpening (covered by most tune ups). Consider buying an extra cutting blade to switch to during mid-season. Sharp blades provide a clean cut which will heal quickly. Dull blades rip and tear grass, opening vascular tissue to disease organisms. Poor cutting also results in lawns taking on a dull, brown appearance — which many lawn jockeys improperly try to correct by fertilizing!



Cut high: Taller grass will develop proportionally deeper, healthier roots, resist drought and summer heat, and naturally prevent most broadleaf weed seeds from germinating. Fescues and bluegrass should be cut no lower than 2-1/2 to 3 inches; zoysia at about 1-1/2 inch.

Alter your mowing pattern: Do not use the same pattern or path to cut your lawn week after week. Periodically changing the direction in which you mow will help you avoid soil compaction.



A Proper Diet

Millions of advertising dollars are spent annually to sell fertilizers or "fertilizer programs," especially in the spring, when lawns have no need for supplemental nutrients. Overfeeding is a principal cause of turf disease. A quick jolt of nitrogen applied now will result in a wild burst of growth — and lots and lots of mowing! And the grass will be leggy and weak, unable to handle stress caused by changing temperatures and too much or too little rain. So hold off fertilizing until the fall, when it is appropriate!

Feed your lawn with clippings: When you grasscycle — leaving clippings behind when you mow — you're helping to recycle all of the free nutrients in every grass particle.



Watering

Improper and over-watering is another cause of lawn disease. Unless while establishing a new lawn or overseeding, you don't need to water at all. Lawns thrive when roots are encouraged — and allowed — to grow deep. Watering creates a hydroponic zone at the top of the soil, making grass lazy and easy prey to drought and the scorching summer sun. Forget watering, and don't worry when fescues and other cool weather grasses brown out during the summer: dormancy is normal -- and inexpensive. Lawns will green-up when cooler temperatures and rainfall return. The environmental and economic cost of keeping a lawn green during the summer is staggering: hundreds of thousands of gallons of water for most lawns. Additionally, improper watering is a major culprit in fungal diseases, especially for folks who water in the evening. Of course, you can always buy fungicides — or you could just stop watering. Incidentally, overfeeding and overwatering are leading causes of thatch. So why bother?

Weeds

Homeowners have been sold an unrealistic picture of a healthy lawn. They expect a perfect monoculture, like a putting green. Weeds are never tolerated, although most of them have more right to be in our soils than the hybridized turf varieties we plant. A vast armada of herbicides are available, many with decidedly lethal brand names. And yet weed control can be chemical-free, for the most part. Perhaps the key ingredient is patience. The fact is that most weeds cannot compete or gain a foothold in a dense, healthy lawn. And weeds can be pushed out by grass — but it will take time. Nature thinks in glacial terms: seasons and years. There are no quick fixes.

Best First Steps

To grow the most vigorous lawn possible, there are certain steps to be followed:



Test your soil: Contact the Cooperative Extension Service at 301.590.9638 and ask for an inexpensive soil test kit. You'll learn exactly what to feed your lawn, how much lime to apply, etc. Since many weeds grow in poor or acidic soils, you can make them go away just by correcting your soil's chemistry.

Aerate your lawn: It's a breath of fresh air for roots and soil, and one of the most recommended practices for relieving compaction, reducing thatch, and encouraging deep and extensive root growth — all of which will force out "undesireables." Some tough weeds, like plantain, will actually thrive in compacted soil — looser, aerated soils will resist such weed incursions. You can rent aerating machines or hire a lawn service.



Select the proper grass variety: Check with University of Maryland Home & Garden information Center at 1-800-342-2507 for advice on the best varieties of grass for your lawn, considering soil type, exposure, existing grass type, etc. The right grass for the right place will give you long-lasting results.

Make a salad: While you wait for weeds to naturally disappear, you can always hand-pick some of the tougher weeds. Many are edible (another argument against pesticides), while others are attractive and only last a short while. Be sure to remove bulbs, in the case of wild garlic and onions, the taproots of tasty dandelions, and as much of the rootstock as possible of other perennial or pernicious weeds.



Topdressing with organic matter: Instead of fertilizing this year, consider spreading 1/4 inch of compost on lawn areas to further loosen heavy clay soils, break down thatch, and improve soil ecology.

Seed and overseed again: Getting soil in shape goes hand in hand with seeding to develop an increasingly dense lawn. Prepare soil and overseed in the Spring, or overseed after topdressing.

Why not relax?

Overall, you will find that working with your lawn is easier than working against it. The best, longest-lasting solutions are the simplest — although they are not the quickest. Balancing the value of human and environmental health against that of an award winning, chemically-dependent lawn, and you will probably decide to change some of your lawn care habits and put up with some weeds.



The GreenMan Show is produced for County Cable Montgomery by the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) and the Office of Public Information. It airs daily on Cable Channel 6 and can also be

viewed on the Internet. For a complete schedule and online access, visit www.greenmanshow.com.

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